

Secretary of the Navy Radio Interview with Acting Secretary Thomas B. Modly by Hugh Hewitt

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Audio Transcript:

Acting Secretary of the Navy Thomas Modly joined me this AM:

HH: Joined now by Acting Secretary of the Navy Thomas Modly. Secretary Modly, welcome back. A month ago, we were talking about the Coronavirus and the Navy. You were prepared then. Now, the Teddy Roosevelt is in Guam with many cases. Can you give us a status update?

TM: Good morning, Hugh. Thanks for having me on. And as you mentioned, the Teddy Roosevelt has pulled into Guam and is tied up pier side there. We're restricting motion of the Sailors off the ship only to the pier area, so they won't be allowed to sort of wander around in Guam. We are testing every single Sailor on that ship, and we're going through that process right now. And all the Sailors that we have so far that have tested positive have been either sort of asymptomatic positive tests or Sailors who were exhibiting very mild symptoms. So that's what we, we don't have anyone that's seriously ill. In fact, the folks that we took off the ship a few days ago, none of them were even hospitalized. They're just sort of in isolation right now in quarantine. So we're just monitoring it very closely and working our way through making sure we have all the Sailors tested.

HH: Now I believe Stanley Bryant is the CO of the Teddy Roosevelt. I'm not sure. I'm always a little bit confused. Are you in communication with the ship? Or are you leaving that to CNO Gilday to do?

TM: Well, it's, the CNO is obviously, you know, this is his chain of command. He's talking to them, but also Admiral Aquilino, who is the Pacific Fleet Commander, is very engaged. And I spoke with him yesterday, and he's in constant communication with them.

HH: How long do you expect the TR to be out of the fleet, because obviously, it's one of our carriers that's supposed to be deployed and deterring bad guys around the world. We need it at sea, right?

TM: Right. Well, and thanks for asking the question, because she's not out of commission in any sense. She's in port right now so this testing can take place. If there were a reason for her to go into action, she could easily go do that. We would just go. And so we certainly, you know, she's close enough to some potential trouble spots that she could certainly mobilize and go quickly. But right now, we're just using the abundance of caution to make sure that all the Sailors on board are healthy.

HH: How long will it take to test a 5,200 Sailor ship?

TM: Well, the inherent capability we had on the ship was to test about 200 people on the ship a day. However, because of this particular circumstance, we're flying in more test kits from other large deck ships that we have, and also sending certain number of samples off the ship so that we can get responses more quickly.

HH: Can you surge personnel to Navy Hospital Guam, which is a great big facility. People have to understand, I think my brother-in-law was born at Guam, because my father-in-law, colonel in the Marine Corps, was stationed there. It's a big hospital. There are a lot of capacity at Guam, but they might not have the personnel to test an entire ship.

TM: Well, the hospital is not the one that's doing the testing. Where the testing is taking place is on the ship itself, and then also the test kits that we don't have the capacity to test on the ship are being sent out to other facilities across the Department of Defense to be tested. So and as I mentioned before, so far, none of these cases have required hospitalizations, so the hospital on Guam really doesn't have any patients from the TR in any of the rooms there.

HH: Do you, I'm glad to hear that. Do you have a date certain when the TR will be able to go back to its assigned mission?

TM: No, I don't have a date on that right now, Hugh. I think we're just working through this as quickly as we possibly can. And as I mentioned before, if there is an issue that they need to go to sea, she will go to sea and respond if she needs to.

HH: But how, I mean, 5,200 people are a lot of people to test. If you don't have people who can do the kind of tests that, for example, Vice President Pence described so accurately, it's a pinch, it takes a while, and you've got to get the results back, and you've got to process the tests. Are you surging people there via C130 or whatever to get the ship back out to sea?

TM: We are, as of right now, we are not surging any additional people to go to the ship. What we're doing is surging the amount of test kits that we can get on the ship and also surging our capacity to send them out to be tested so that we can get through this more quickly. As you know, we have, as you mentioned, over 5,000 people on that ship. At a pace of 200 a day, that could take 25 days. We're obviously, that's not acceptable, so we're driving towards a quicker ability to do that by utilizing some of the other testing facilities we have.

HH: Now this is a little geek speak, and I'm really out of my league, but I talked to Ward and other people. How long until your pilots lose their qualifications, because people don't understand how well-trained these F-18, I don't think there are F-35's on the Theodore Roosevelt. I might be wrong. But there are all sorts of aircraft, and they're all qualified to fly, but they've got to fly to stay qualified. When do you start losing your quals?

TM: That's a good question, Hugh, and I don't, I'm quite certain that the Air Wing is thinking through all of those issues. I don't have an answer for you on that, but I'm, as part of this whole, all of the planning and the contingencies that are being thought through on this, all those are being considered. And obviously, we won't get into a situation where that is a problem.

HH: All right, let me widen the scope. You were very prepared a month ago for this to hit. How is the Navy doing, and it was inevitable – you have all these people in a small, contained ship, even though it's a massive ship with 5,200 people. But all throughout the Navy, you've got bases, you've got ships going all around the world, and they can't stop. They protect freedom of navigation. They protect America. We can't stop. How is your preparation plan surviving the fog of war as the famously said no plan survives first contact with the enemy? The enemy is the virus. How's your plan surviving?

TM: Well, I think we're doing okay. I think obviously, just like everybody else in this crisis, we're having to adjust a lot on the fly as we learn more about the virus and how it's behaving. And as you mentioned, we've been looking at this, actually, since well before I spoke to you about it on the phone. So you know, late January, we were already thinking through contingencies and what we would do, getting guidance out to the ships and to the CO's so that

they understood how to do this, how the crews should be careful, and what they would do in certain contingencies. So I think we're prepared as we can be, and you know, obviously, you're right. It's almost unavoidable, and we have to just work our way through it. And I've asked, you know, I've been asking the CNO and the Commandant to look at both the Navy and the Marine Corps beyond just our own operational challenges that we have, but you know, the nation needs us as well. And I've asked them to think very, very creatively right now about how the Navy and the Marine Corps team can assist the nation in the broader mission that we have here. And you're seeing that come to play now with the Mercy and the Comfort, which I asked the question way back in early February, how do we engage this, engage those ships in case we need to engage them? And I think some of that prompting got them ready quickly. And so this weekend, those ships are going to start arriving and helping out the nation in a way that we probably didn't anticipate six months ago.

HH: I've got to say, my hat is off to you, the CNO, the Commandant of the Marine Corps. You are prepared. And I am astonished that the hospital ship in Norfolk is ready to go. I know how long it takes to get a ship ready to go. I thought it would be weeks. What did they do? How did they get this thing ready to go?

TM: Well, I'm going down to see the Comfort tomorrow, and I'm going to ask a lot of those questions. I asked the question back in February about how long would it take, and you know, the regular maintenance schedule that they had didn't have it ready until later in the summer or early fall. And that just wasn't good enough. And so they put their thinking caps on and came up with creative ways to get through this more quickly. And it took an all hands on deck effort by the shipyard as well as, you know, the Navy. And I'm very, very proud of what they've done so far. And I know the whole country will be even more proud of them when they get up to New York and start helping out directly in this crisis.

HH: I've only been on a few ships in my life, Secretary Modly, but they're always clean. Nevertheless, this virus lives on surfaces a long time. Has the Navy tripled, quadrupled, quintupled its cleaning efforts?

TM: Oh, that's, those are part of the protocols that we sent out quite a while ago in terms of cleaning up and using different types of cleaners. One of the things that we found is a lot of these green environmentally-acceptable cleaners aren't so good in terms of cleaning the virus. So we're kind of going back to bleach and other things that traditionally have been known to work in these situations. And so we're doing a lot of that on the ships. As you can imagine, the effort

right now on the Teddy Roosevelt to clean up spaces where we know these Sailors were, and as I mentioned, you know, we're doing this testing, but the testing is not random. We're doing very forensic-based testing to understand who these Sailors came in contact with. Those are the first ones that we're testing. And you know, so right now, it has not been isolated to certain areas of the ship. It's all different areas of the ship. Luckily, nothing in the food service area, and so that's encouraging. But no, we're...

HH: Have you lost any of your command structure on the ship to the virus?

TM: Not as far as I know right now, sir.

HH: All right, I've got to ask, because the last time you were on, you made some news. I didn't even know you made news. You announced that it looked like the selection of the new frigate was going to be advanced. Do you have a date for that, yet, Secretary Modly?

TM: I don't have a date, but we're looking to, as I mentioned before, they were looking to try and do this in the latter part of this fiscal year, so end of the summer. And I think we'll be significantly ahead of that.

HH: By significantly, June?

TM: I would hope so. I don't want to say anything that would sort of compromise where we are in the process. But I think that it's actually, we will hopefully have the ability to that, you know, before June.

HH: When the President comes down to see the hospital ship in Norfolk, I assume you'll be with him. Will you review with him then the plan for 355 ships? And I mean taking the TR out even for a week shows we are just thin on carriers. We just are.

TM: Well, that'll be up to him whether he wants to talk about that with me during this time. I mean, frankly, I think most of his attention, as it should be, is on this crisis and helping the nation work its way through this crisis. So whatever I can do to help him understand what the Navy and the Marine Corps can do to help in that mission, I think that's probably what we'll be talking about. However, I'm always ready to talk about that other issue, as you know. So I'm always ready to talk about it. It's something I'm very passionate about, that I've been trying to

get the Navy to think about more creatively. And so yeah, I'll be ready to do that if he wants to talk about it.

HH: Now let me talk about the 60 day hold in place. Are soldiers who are deployed in combat zones covered by that, I mean people who have been in high temp operating? Are they going to be another 60 days? I think of your naval special warfare people. They operate at such a tempo, as described by General McChrystal in his books, I can't imagine keeping them in place for an additional 60 days.

TM: Well, there is a lot of discretion on this as well. I mean, there is a blanket hold on movement, however the commanders do have the ability to waive some of these in certain circumstances. So they're looking at those on a case to case basis to determine whether or not people need to be rotated out for those types of reasons that you just cited.

HH: Generally speaking, last question, is the United States Navy at sea with the same amount of power as it was before the virus raised its deadly head?

TM: We're absolutely out there. We're absolutely ready for anything that comes our way. I will say that we sort of scaled back on port visits. We've scaled back on some exercises. But the ships are still out there, and they're manned and crewed with the best Sailors in the world, and they're ready to do what they need to do if they have to.

HH: Acting Secretary of the Navy Modly, thank you. By the way, I hate saying Acting Secretary. I was Acting Director of OPM once long ago, and it just means you got all of the responsibility of being the Secretary of the Navy, and they put acting in front of it. It makes me crazy when I was director of OPM as an acting director. It just makes me crazy. But I've got to play by the rules. Acting Secretary Modly, thank you.

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